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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 002600

SIPDIS

FROM THE AMBASSADOR  
ALSO FOR WHA A/S NORIEGA, S STAFF, D STAFF, P STAFF

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S VIEWS ON VENEZUELA'S REFERENDUM

Classified By: Ambassador Charles S. Shapiro for reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) By law, the Venezuelan recall referendum campaign ends August 12 at midnight. Eighteen months ago the idea that Venezuelans could determine their own future through the ballot box seemed a dream, if not a mirage. On August 15 record numbers of Venezuelans will go to the polls and make their voices heard. The credit for this democratic and mostly peaceful outcome belongs to the Venezuelan people, supported by the OAS, Carter Center, and the USG and other governments.

¶2. (C) The United States can be proud of the role we have played. We have used our influence bilaterally and through the OAS and Group of Friends to help bring about a peaceful, democratic, constitutional and electoral solution. We have worked to strengthen democratic institutions. We have discouraged those who would use shortcuts, and above all have pressured the Chavez administration to play by the rules established in the Venezuelan constitution. We have resisted Chavez's repeated efforts to bilateralize the referendum. Polling data is contradictory, and there are serious questions about the reliability of the polls. Both sides explain with equal conviction how they are winning. It is now up to the Venezuelan voters to make their voices heard.

¶3. (C) The Government and its majority on the National Electoral Council (CNE) have done everything they could to make it difficult for international observers to do their jobs. The OAS and Carter Center have negotiated what they consider to be minimally acceptable conditions. Only this morning did the Carter Center obtain all of the credentials and the unrestricted access it needs in order to do its job. If the Opposition wins by a narrow margin, the government will do everything it can to move one or two percent of the vote from Si to No. There will be tremendous pressure on the OAS and Carter Center observers to bless the process even if it is flawed. I spoke August 10 with former Argentine President Alfonsn and former Costa Rican President Carrazo. Both were already dismissing concerns of the Carter Center technical experts as the sort of normal background noise one sees in any election. Their attitude makes the role of Jimmy Carter that much more important.

¶4. (C) The polls close at 4:00 pm EDT, but they will stay open until all of those in line at 4:00 cast their vote. The CNE has committed to releasing preliminary results by 7:00 pm. The Carter Center and OAS technical experts should have their quick counts by then and are prepared to act if the CNE's numbers vary significantly from their own.

¶5. (C) There is a chance of violence both from the victors and from the losers no matter what the outcome. We have reviewed our security posture, issued a Public Announcement to American citizens, and battened down the hatches.

¶6. (C) The Opposition has worked wonders to get this far. It has directed its campaign to those already committed to the Opposition, attacking Chavez for all of his shortcomings, for polarizing the nation, and for his authoritarian style of governing. Those messages worked well enough to get them through the reparos and they are sticking with what got them here. They have developed a platform that tells people generally what they would do if they were to govern the country, but they have not been successful in conveying it to the voters in specific terms.

¶7. (C) Chavez has campaigned both to his supporters and to the undecided voters. Using the entire government machinery - and intimidation and retaliation - his campaign has reached every corner of the country and is directed at convincing voters that their lives will be better and their children's future better by sticking with him rather than taking a leap of faith with the Opposition. Chavez's repeated vitriolic attacks on the United States in his press conference today makes me wonder if he is not doing as well as he says he is.

¶8. (C) The voters go to the polls Sunday to chose between two very clear options. For the Opposition to win, the most respected polling organizations would have to be wrong. For Chavez to win, he will have to win more votes than he has in

any past election; the newly registered voters, and the most marginalized of the poor in the shantytowns and remote rural settlements would have turn out in greater numbers than they ever have. The imponderables include the weather, the willingness of voters to endure long lines, the reliability of new fingerprinting checking and touch-screen voting machines, whether there is fraud, and if so, the ability of the international observers to detect and act upon this fraud. This recall referendum is too close to call.  
Shapiro

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